



## Critical Incident Stress

Information in this handout should be shared with family members and those closest to you. Increasing awareness of potential symptoms and reactions to critical incident stress enhances everyone's ability to provide coping mechanisms and resources.

### What is a traumatic critical incident?

A traumatic critical incident is any incident during which a person experiences, witnesses, or is confronted with serious injury, death, mass casualties; any incident in which a person's life has been imperilled or threatened; or any situation that is recognized at the time to have the potential to significantly interfere immediately or at a later time with a person's ability to function professionally or personally.

### What is critical incident stress?

Critical incident stress refers to the range of physical and psychological symptoms that might be experienced by someone as a result of being involved in a traumatic critical incident. Critical incident stress is simply the body's normal reaction to an abnormal event.

These reactions are considered normal and to be expected. They should never be seen or thought of as a sign of weakness.

### Understanding the impact of a traumatic incident

Reactions to any critical incident vary and each individual will have his/her own unique response to what is a sudden and unexpected event. Immediately after a critical incident there may be an initial period of shock and disbelief. The shock reaction can have different manifestations. Not all persons involved in the same incident experience the same degree/severity or type of stress reaction. Some may not experience any stress reaction at all, this is also normal.

Stress reactions can occur at the scene or be delayed and may not begin to surface until hours, days or weeks after the event.

Stress reactions are usually temporary, and can last for varying durations. Most individuals find that stress reactions have improved or disappeared completely within four to six weeks after exposure to a traumatic critical incident. If symptoms continue after four to six weeks, the individual may be vulnerable to the development of a more chronic condition, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Under these circumstances, it is

recommended that the individual seek assistance from a community mental health professional.

For any individual who is impacted by the critical incident the reaction will be multifaceted. The impact on the individual may be reflected not only in the feelings expressed, but also by the behaviours observed.

### Signs of critical incident stress

These are some of the signs and symptoms that you may experience:

#### Physical

The first and most profound effect of being in a critical incident is being physically shocked, which results from the sudden release of hormones and adrenaline into the blood stream, and can appear as:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sleep disorders</li><li>• Nightmares/unpleasant dreams</li><li>• Chest pain</li><li>• Neck/back pain</li><li>• Gastrointestinal disorders</li><li>• Decreased sexual drive</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Appetite disorders</li><li>• Headaches</li><li>• Dizzy spells</li><li>• Muscle tremors</li><li>• Increase chance of flu/colds</li><li>• Menstrual irregularity</li></ul> |
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#### Emotional

People involved in critical incidents often report a wide range of emotional reactions. These generally do not happen immediately after the trauma but occur when the physical shock has worn off somewhat, usually the next day.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Guilt and/or sorrow</li><li>• Irritability</li><li>• Anxiety</li><li>• Feelings of being alone</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Grief</li><li>• Anger</li><li>• Hindsight (second guessing)</li></ul> |
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#### Cognitive

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Denial</li><li>• Lack of concentration</li><li>• Flashbacks</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Altered life outlook</li><li>• Short-term memory problems</li><li>• Difficulty making decisions</li></ul> |
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#### Behavioural

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Crying spells</li><li>• Decreased sexual drive</li><li>• Loss of interest in your job</li><li>• Increase use of alcohol/drugs</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Withdrawal</li><li>• Loss of interest in home life</li><li>• Increased accidents</li><li>• Compulsive need to discuss incident</li></ul> |
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Memories of previous involvement in trauma or critical incidents have the potential to trigger or intensify emotional reaction to the recent critical incident. This can provoke behaviour that seems out of character, especially in traumas that can be described as uncomplicated.

### Critical incident stress management techniques on site

- Be active.
- Eat nutritious foods frequently, in small amounts.
- Use controlled humour.
- Make positive self-statements.
- Do deep breathing.
- Take breaks.
- Display controlled emotions: Talk about how you are feeling.

### After the incident

- Engage in reasonable physical exercise (within 24 hr.).
- Get rest.
- Eat good nutritious foods.
- Maintain normal schedule.
- Avoid boredom (hobbies).
- Talk about your feelings.
- Don't fight too hard against flashbacks and dreams.
- Attend mandatory defusing or debriefings if requested to do so.

### Family assistance

The effects of a traumatic critical incident vary significantly across individuals. Some people will feel little impact while others may experience significant trauma as a result of exposure to the same event. At times, family or others who care about the individual may have questions about what to expect and about the best ways to assist. Although every individual and every situation is different, the following advice may prove helpful as you offer support to a person who has been exposed to a traumatic critical incident.

- Family or other individuals close to the affected person are in the best position to detect and identify changes in behaviour or demeanour that may be the result of a person's involvement in a traumatic critical incident. In order to be best prepared to assist the individual, it would be helpful to review the signs and symptoms of critical incident stress that are listed in this handout. Although some individuals may display a strong reaction, remember that most people may experience very few signs of

critical incident stress; others may show no reaction at all. All of these responses are normal.

- Family members should be aware that support and open communication are valued tools when dealing with someone who has been involved in a traumatic critical incident. If the person wishes to discuss the incident, be empathetic and participate in the discussion. This process may assist them in remembering what occurred during the incident and in dealing with his/her response to it.
- Active listening and open communication concerning noticeable changes in demeanour or behaviour following a traumatic critical incident, including any of the possible signs of critical incident stress, is encouraged.
- If the individual chooses not to talk about the incident or his/her reaction, respect that decision. Even if they are not talking about the incident, encourage them to spend time with family and other individuals who can provide a source of quiet social support and a sense that life goes on, even when traumatic critical incidents have occurred.

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